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ABSTRACT

Associating the personnel turnover in the small, rural public schools of Willcox, Arizona with implementation of a plan for change under the National Institute of Education's Experimental Schools Program (1973), this paper attempts to explain staff turnover in terms of the anthropological concept "world view" as manifest in pupil-centered vs adult-centered perceptions of time. Specifically, this paper asserts that Willcox school personnel hired under the Experimental Schools Program were faced with an ambiguous situation in that there was no clear distinction made between adult-centered and student-centered roles. The analysis of extensive formal and informal interviews with school people as presented here suggests that: there was a definite correlation between staff turnover and the impact of the Experimental Schools Program; the creation of new positions for implementing federally sponsored change is no easy task, since people brought in to be change agents do not seem to be able to operate effectively without a personal tradition of pupil-centered or adult-centered "world views"; and the adult-centered world of administrators can more readily incorporate new people within its structures than the pupil-centered world. (JC)

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WORLD VIEW AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE:

A STUDY OF TIME IN A SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Abstract:

A small school district undergoing federally sponsored change has experienced large-scale staff turnover in positions related to the implementation of change. The anthropological concept of world view is discussed as useful in understanding such personnel change. Conceptions of pupil-centered time and adult-centered time are developed out of school people's own discussions and ideas about the school district and federal program. This paper illustrates the kind of contribution anthropology can make to understanding American education.

[1975]

ALLAN F. BURNS

WORLD VIEW AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE: A STUDY OF TIME IN A SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICT[1]

This paper draws a relationship between the symbolic use and place of time in a small school system and the process of implementing educational change, especially when that change has a non-local impetus. The approach of the research which forms the basis for this discussion is ethnographic, although the present report is more of an ethnographic vignette than a full ethnographic study. For the past two years, I have been engaged in carrying out an ethnographic study of the Willcox schools and their community context.[2] Through formal and informal discussions and observations with school people at all levels of the system, the conception of time in schools has been found to be central to the way education is thought about and carried out.

I stress that the approach of the research is ethnographic in order to underline the kind of contribution that anthropological inquiry can make to the study of education. This paper offers an illustration of how a significant educational issue or problem arises from long-term field experience, and how concepts derived from the discipline offer tools for subsequent analysis and understanding of that problem. The particular kind of educational change which is of interest here is change in school personnel, or staff turnover, and how this relates to educational innovation. Put simply, this paper examines why so many people come and go in a small school system, and how a particular case of extreme educational mobility is related to a local project of planned change sponsored through the National Institute of Education's Experimental Schools program.[3]

In a broader sense, this paper brings to surface the issue of organizational continuity in schools. Although new programs of educational change are ideally owned by the system, in reality they are often associated with one or two people who were instrumental for their initial planning. The dilemna of this contrast between formal (and legal) ownership by the system and informal ownership by school people is confounded by cases of rapid turnover in staff positions, especially those related to such innovative programs. The difficulty of separating programs from the people who run them was expressed by one Willcox educator as I discussed research goals with him: "I don't know how you'll do it. There were a lot of personalities written into that Plan."[4]

The Setting and Evolution of the Problem

Willcox, Arizona is a community located about ninety miles east of Tucson and about seventy miles north of the Mexican border. Some 8,000 people live within a fifty mile radius of the town of Willcox. Cattle ranching, irrigation farming, and support services have dominated the economy of the area and have provided a strong base for slow but steady growth since the area was settled by Anglos in the late nineteenth century. The school district today serves 3,000 people who live in the town of Willcox, as well as another 2,000 who live outside of the town limits. Fifteen hundred students attend the Willcox schools, and are equally divided between an elementary, a middle, and a high school. The district employs some 150 people, seventy-five of whom are certified. Classroom organization follows a national model, as the elementary classes are self contained, while the middle and high schools operate with subject area departments. In June of 1973, Willcox was selected by the National Institute of Education's Experimental

Schools program to be one of the ten small school districts in the country to receive extensive support in order to implement a five year project of planned, comprehensive educational change.

In August of 1973, ethnographic research was begun in the community. The overall goal of the research was to study the nature of change in the school system and community. The research was designed to be documentary, and specifically not intrusive into the implementation of the local project. I came to the field with a broad working hypothesis that the planned change to be documented could be divided into two realms, the ideal and the actual. The ideal change at the beginning of the program was easy to determine. It existed in the form of a single document, the Plan for Comprehensive Change in the Willcox Public Schools (Willcox Public Schools, 1973). This document resulted in the contract between Willcox and the National Institute of Education which specified the expected changes and necessary level of funding for the project. The document was a charter for locally determined comprehensive change. It was a summation of how a small school system could become more responsive to the community in which it resided, how the schools could expand their course offerings by bringing in specialists, and how the district could upgrade the quality of education by coordinating the way the three schools operated. The charter enumerated five major areas of change: School administration and governance, staff utilization and training, curriculum, community involvement, and facility use. Within the area of curriculum, major programs were planned for reading, early childhood education, bilingual education, counseling and guidance, and media. The local project also had a provision for continuous evaluation to aid administrators in making decisions about the project as it proceeded. Without going into the Plan any further,

it can be said that the changes planned for were fundamental to the system, and extremely difficult to effect.

Actual changes which occurred were not explicit in the same sense as the ideal changes. The actual changes were observable only as they arose from the day to day life of the school system. For example, during the first days of fieldwork, I learned that the middle school principal who was the primary author of the Plan had resigned from the system. So too had the superintendent who had overseen the writing, the documentor who had logged the process, and the teacher who had been a half-time project director. All of these changes in personnel were said to have occurred as the result of combined commmunity dissatisfaction with the administration and personal desires for career mobility. Of the core staff who had planned for comprehensive change the year before, only the project secretary remained in the fall of 1973. During the next year, the Plan for Comprehensive Change was implemented by a new superintendent and nine people brought in to fill the vacated and newly-created positions. Before long, some of these people began to leave the system. The documentation carried out during that year indicated that two separate phenomena were taking place: On one hand, the project was carrying out changes in curriculum, organization, and community involvement as outlined in the Plan. On the other hand, people came and went through project associated positions with suprising frequency. The conception of educational change in Willcox expanded from the hypothesis of an ideal/actual split to a second level where the actual changes consisted of (1) changes in the running of the schools, and (2) changes in personnel. Changes in personnel gained importance as time went on. During the first eighteen

months of the project, the planned goals began to be implemented, but over twenty-five changes in personnel occurred. Positions created by the Experimental Schools sponsored program seemed especially vulnerable to turnover. A short chronology of the project at the local level illustrates the magnitude of these changes.

The project began implementation in August of 1973, which will be referred to as month one. It began, as has been noted, with a new staff of coordinators, two new principals, and a new superintendent. At the outset of month three, the bilingual coordinator resigned. During month four the evaluation coordinator resigned. As month five began, a new evaluation coordiantor was hired, and during month seven, a new bilingual coordinator was hired. At the close of the first school year (month 10), the superintendent who had been there for less than a year resigned, as did an elementary counselor and the early childhood coordinator. During the summer (month 11), the administrative assistant in charge of the project moved to take over the elementary principalship, while the elementary principal became the district business agent, a new position. As school began the second year (month 12 and 13) a new superintendent and a new early childhood coordinator came into the district. At the same time, the second bilingual coordinator resigned. During month 13 a new administrative assistant arrived to help run the project; a month later (month 14) the second evaluation coordinator resigned. During month 16 the middle school principal left his post and became the director of an "evaluation committee" for five weeks before he became a fifth grade teacher. The middle school counselor became the principal in that school.

This chronology is not exhaustive of all the changes, but serves to

indicate the degree of turnover in the system since the inception of the local Experimental Schools project. In contrast with this almost monthly turnover, the classroom teaching staff has remained stable, with twenty-three percent turnover the first year and twelve percent the second year. The turnover rate in positions related to the Experimental Schools program has been 178 percent. Willcox had become a leader in educational change.

It could be argued that it did not take an anthropologist living in the community for the two years to stumble on this problem. Project monitors in Washington were aware of it, as were educators familiar with school districts in Arizona. The point here is that an ethnographic case study approach allows this issue to be placed in the context of the life history of educational change in Willcox. The paradigm used to look at the Willcox schools allows for different kinds of educational change to surface beyond those officially specified in a given plan.

The Explanation

Extensive formal and informal interviews with school people suggested that the phenomena of high staff turnover was not an artifact of chance, but rather reflects something about the local district and Experimental Schools project. Beyond the statements about the need for career mobility and a more satisfying work environment was a kind of ambiguity built into the positions which the project created. This ambiguity is related to the anthropological concept of "world view" as described by Redfield (1953), Benedict (1934), and most recently Jones (1972). Briefly stated, world view is the description of how people themselves carve up the world of experience into mental reality.

The project created positions which demanded simultaneous adherence to two separate patterns of world view held by Willcox educators. This ambiguity led to the movement described. Ambiguity in world view is more profound than the idea of "role conflicts" which social scientists often turn to in frustrating circumstances. As many studies in the sociological tradition have indicated, people can easily handle many competing roles within their social persona, such as mother, teacher, student, and so on. On the other hand, as Castaneda (1968) has illustrated through his writings about his studies with the Yaqui shaman Don Juan, people seem ill-equiped to handle two separate views of the nature of social and natural reality. While role refers to the presentation of self outward (Goffman, 1959), world view refers to the incorporation of the world inward. The specific item of world view considered here is the use of time.

Time, for Willcox educators, and for that matter educators in many other settings, is a central feature of school organization. School people create time structures such as the "school year," "semesters," "grading periods," the "school day," and "class periods" out of the continual tu rn of the seasons. Two aspects of the use of time as world view are important to this discussion. First of all, the structures of time in schools are artifacts. They are created by people and are only indirectly related to the passing of the seasons or the ultimate entropic movement of the universe. Time structures reflect the organization of jobs and work in schools. The human aspect of time leads to a second point, that different groups within the system have different views of time. Educators interact with the world view of time they create. Some argue for free time, others for schools without bells. Many urban school systems have a"day"school for students of one age group (young people) and

a "night" school for older people.

At the local level of Willcox, two ways of using time occur: people spend time with students or they spend time with adults. These two modes roughly correspond to the formal distinction in the system between teachers and administrators, but the fit is not exact.

The pupil-centered mode of time use exists within a formal working day which begins at 8:15 in the morning and continues until 3:45 in the afternoon, while the adult-centered mode exists within an eight in the morning until five in the afternoon day. The pupil-centered mode follows a state-mandated school year of 180 days, beginning in late August and ending in late May, while the adult-centered mode is in effect twelve months of the year. The length of employee contracts in the system reflects this aspect of time use: administrators normally have twelve month contracts while teachers have ten month contracts. The pupil-centered mode is organized into discrete periods of "class periods" signalled by bells in the high school, and chimes in the middle and elementary school. Lesson plans are one physical manifestation of this type of time division. The adult-centered mode is organized according to scheduled meetings with other adults and time for "paper work" or report writing, and is manifested in the small "executive calenders" used by people in the adult-centered mode. Through previous experience, training, and career expectations, educators enter the system and choose to spend their time in one way or the other. If they are required to use time both ways, such as in the position of "teaching principal", the day is split into two parts, a part for pupil-centered activity and a part for adult-centered activity.

There are many examples of the way these two modes are referred to in the everyday running of the schools. For instance, one pupil-centered educator showed his disdain for a person of the adult-centered mode by stating, "I'm tired of all these people drawing salaries and not spending any time with kids." A request for a school board policy change by a teacher's organization spelled out the rationale for the pupil-centered mode:

> "Teachers shall arrive in the morning before classes and may leave in the afternoon as soon after the last regularly scheduled class in their schools as will, within reason, permit them to fulfill professional obligations in connection with:
>
> 1. Availability to students who may be seeking assistance,
> 2. Availability to parents who may wish to discuss school-related problems,
> 3. Meeting with staff specialists,
> 4. Availability to administrative and supervisory personnel for conferences,
> 5. Availability to colleagues,
> 6. The maintenance of classroom housekeeping and organization" (Willcox Federation of Teachers, 1975).

The ideology of the adult-centered mode was described by one administrator as follows:

> "People ask why I make more money than a teacher, and I tell them that a teacher only works part of a day. I'm here from eight in the morning until five at night,

all year long."

It was into this two part system of school time use that the local Willcox variant of the Experimental Schools program was launched. The positions created by the program were not properly administrative in that they often involved teaching students and working with teachers at a peer level. Asymmetrical authority relationships between the Experimental Schools-created positions and the teaching staff were consciously avoided. On the other hand, the positions had characteristics of administrative posts in that they carried twelve month contracts, had a salary level comparable to traditional administrative posts in the schools, and demanded close coordination with the traditional administrative structure of the district. The nature of the positions was such that a clear cut distinction between spending time with students and spending time with adults could not easily be drawn. People in the positions strove to mold them into one mode or the other. For example, some coordinators attempted to become "pupil-centered" by putting up bulletin board displays more appropriate to a classrrom in their adult-centered offices. Others went in the direction of the adult-centered world and tried to insulate themselves from students, and dealt with teachers in as much of a supervisory way as they could. But although the role expectations of the positions were clear enough on paper, the conflicting world views inherent in the jobs left the coordinators "spinning their wheels" as one put it:

> "You can't expect them (the teaching staff) to work with you if you don't know what you're doing; and if you don't know what you're doing, you can't tell them!"

A further indication of the ambiguity of the positions was the label "coordinator" which was given them. "Coordinator" was a new lexical item exported from Washington to Willcox which could not be easily sorted into the local vocabulary of schooling.

Faced with this ambiguity of how to spend their time, people in the Experimental Schools-related positions began to move. Several who had been brought in as coordinators but had a pupil-centered world view left and took teaching jobs in other districts. A common strategy for adult-centered coordinators was to become "full-fledged" administrators in the district. Examples of this strategy include the middle school counselor who became the principal in that school, and the counselor for the elementary school who later became the administrative assistant in charge of all federal programs. These internal moves had ramifications throughout the network of administrative posts. For example, the dissatisfaction of one person with a project position led her to move to the elementary principal position. This then led to the former elementary principal being placed in the superintendent's office as business agent.

Conclusions

Some tentative conclusions are in order as one surveys the events of personnel turnover in Willcox. First of all, the creation of new positions for implementing federally sponsored educational change is no easy task. People brought in to be change agents in schools do not seem to be able to effectively operate without a tradition of either spending time with pupils or spending time with adults. This is true even of people who may not have been public school employees previously. Like a tree, a school system

must have roots which give it nourishment. In grafting new positions onto the system, careful attention must be given to the ways of connecting to the roots.

The second conclusion which can be drawn from this experience is that the adult-centered world of administrators seems more capable of incorporating new people into its structure than the pupil-centered world. In only two cases did coordinators successfully enter the pupil-centered world. During the same time period, the number of administrative positions in the district rose from four to eight.

As this discussion is based on research which has not been completed, a final question awaits an answer: Is such rapid turnover beneficial or harmful to implementing educational change?

Notes:

1. This paper was presented in an earlier draft form at the 1975 annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C. in the Symposium, A Multidisciplinary Study of Planned Change. Comments by Elizabeth Eddy, Harry Wolcott, and Robert Herriott were useful in the development of the paper. I retain responsibility for the interpretations given in the manuscript.
2. Research which forms the basis of the report has been carried out under the auspices of Abt Associates Incorporated contract with the National Institute of Education, #OEC-0-72-5245. I wish to also acknowledge the debt I owe to the school people of Willcox who have shared their lives with me. Without their help, humor, and interest, this project could not take place.
3. The National Institute of Education's Experimental Schools program has sponsored ten small rural school districts as well as five urban systems and several "street academies" through long-term funding.
4. This refers to the Willcox Plan for Comprehensive Change in the Willcox Public Schools (1973).

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